WHEN THE ORDINARY BECOMES THE EXTRAORDINARY

February 9, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 2:1-11

"There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee...Jesus and his disciples had been invited." --John 2:1-2 (NRSV)

There is something about a wedding that stops us in our tracks. We can't seem to resist it. When the bride and groom emerge from the church, traffic slows down on Michigan Avenue, sidewalk pedestrians gather around to watch and to become, for a moment, part of a wonderful occasion, when two people, ordinary people actually, are quite extraordinary. No matter who they are, where they are from, no matter what they normally look like, no matter their size or shape or taste in clothes, at this moment they look elegant. She is always beautiful, and so is he. There is an instant in the wedding which only the wedding party and clergy can see, when the bride appears in the narthex door at the head of the aisle, and they see each other looking like this, and everything they feel, everything they have tried to say to each other, everything they hope for the future is in their hearts which are fairly bursting. It's no wonder people cry at weddings - brides and grooms, attendants on both sides, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, and friends, even the minister has to work hard to maintain control. It is an extraordinary occasion.

And, because it is extraordinary, a lot can go wrong, and usually does! There are hundreds of details, even for "simple weddings" - an oxymoron if ever there was one. There is no such thing as a "simple wedding."

It begins with arrangements for the church, clergy, music. It includes reception, refreshments, caterers, florist and photographer. It is all enormously complicated - and expensive. And then the real work begins - deciding who will be invited, a negotiating process between two families, living in different states, who don't know each other at all, who might not like each other when they do become acquainted, whose only common ground is the fact that their offspring love each other, and of course the possibility that they may one day share grandchildren. It becomes precarious quickly.

And then the time arrives and the possibility for problems, disaster even, becomes larger and larger. On the day itself all the planning, all the details must come quickly and simultaneously into focus. Everyone must show up at the same place at the same time, with the appropriate attire on; and like clockwork, florist, photographer, caterer and frequently the carriage driver must perform with the punctuality of a major military operation.

A lot can go wrong. Someone can forget the license or the rings. A favorite aunt from New Hampshire can be late because she couldn't understand why it should take so long to park the car near the church. Someone can faint. The weather can be awful - too hot or too cold or too windy. The groom can decide to step outside for a breath of fresh air at the last minute and terrifies all the people who are wondering if he really will go through with this. The matron-of-honor who lives in a western suburb can forget her dress, turn around and go back home to retrieve it, get caught in an Eisenhower expressway traffic jam and then, thanks to Ameritech, call the receptionist every three minutes to report on her location, who tells the minister who tries discreetly to tell the organist, who long since has completed the prelude music, to keep on playing, while the congregation, knowing something is wrong, wonders if the worst has happened.

And then, the children, favorite nieces and nephews, who became gorgeously attired if sometimes reluctant and very unhappy flower girls and ring bearers. Mostly they are wonderful. Sometimes they look down the aisle and say, "Not me! No way! I'm not going! Not today!" or get half way down and stop, or turn around and go back, or climb in a pew for a little rest, or once here, wave to the crowd, sit down on the steps, inspect the chancel, climb up on a seat, help the minister by talking, and on one occasion, throw up.

It is extraordinary.

And so it was in a little village called Cana, nine miles north of Nazareth, 2,000 years ago. "There was a wedding...the mother of Jesus was there...Jesus and his disciples had been invited." The historians can help us reconstruct the situation because of what they know about the culture. A wedding began with a procession of friends and family members, escorting the bride to the groom's house for the wedding banquet or wedding feast. Not unlike our own custom, close friends, neighbors and all the relatives were there. The fact that Jesus, his disciples and his mother were there suggests that this was perhaps a relative of Mary's - her sister's home; the groom - her nephew. The wedding feast continued for a week. There was a lot of eating and drinking, laughing, storytelling, toasting and well-wishing, children playing with cousins, a real celebration.

The custom was that invited guests brought wine to help the groom's family who were responsible for the food and refreshments. And it has been seriously suggested that the disaster which is about to happen at this wedding happened because Jesus and his friends, being poor, didn't bring any wine and known, as they were known apparently, for their eating and drinking, they had helped drink up the supply of wine, even before the party was over. Whatever the cause, it is a major disaster. The wine is gone and the guests aren't. The groom is angry, the father is embarrassed, his mother is frantic, the bride is in tears. Mary, maybe an aunt, sees it all happen, considers the alternatives, turns to her son and says, in effect, "Do something." And if the assumptions are correct about why the wine ran out in the first place, what she is really saying is "you and your friends caused this problem, you solve it..." which is perhaps why he first refuses and then changes his mind.

"Fill the jars" - the ones in the foyer which hold the water for guests to wash their hands - six of them. "Fill them up to the top" - 20 gallons each. And when the caterer samples the content, ordinary well water has become fine wine, so good that in a kind of inside joke, he makes a crack about bringing out the good wine now, after the party is well under way and no one will much notice the difference.

What happened? That's our question. It's not the right one, but it's ours.

C.S. Lewis, in his little book on the miracles said, "Every year, as part of the natural order, God makes wine. God does so by creating a vegetable organism that can turn water, soil and sunlight, into a juice which will, under proper conditions, became wine. God constantly turns water into wine... The miracle consists in a short cut." [Miracles, p. 141] The author, the reporter, who is telling the story calls it a "sign." That intentionally directs us from the mechanics to the meaning, tells us at the outset that the whole point of the story is the "sign" and what it is pointing to. Or, as one writer asks it, "Was the water really turned into wine, or did it just taste that way because Jesus was there,...when Jesus was there even the ordinary was apt to turn extraordinary." [Frederick Buechner, A Room Called Remember, p. 68]

That's the point, I believe with Jesus factored in, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, water becomes wine and a disaster turns into a celebration. When Jesus the Christ is present, ordinary men and women become extraordinary - like the accountant and school teacher standing in front of us, beautiful and elegant, in tuxedo and white gown, you and I become something unlikely and unheard of actually - honored, valued, desired guests at an abundant heavenly banquet...God's guests. That's what the

sign points to - to Jesus, God's son, God's Christ, who has the power and the authority and the love to do that.

Think of it. John the Baptist, out in the desert in his loin cloth eating locusts, with whom Jesus was always compared, wouldn't have been caught dead at that wedding. Nor would many people who wish to be his disciple today. Catholic scholar Raymond Brown observes, in a studied understatement, "Many feel uneasy with the implication that Jesus changed 120 gallons of water into wine." [The Gospel According to Joh, Vol. I, p. 100] I'll say! But the sign is pointing to a Lord whose Lordship is precisely his ability to create the extraordinary out of the ordinary, who takes a very human occasion crowded with human frailty, pettiness, love and hope, and makes of it a holy occasion. The sign points to a man who doesn't know the difference between the secular and the sacred, who finds holiness in the commonplace, who sees God in the love parents have for their prodigal child, and in an old woman's generosity and a shepherd's loyalty to his sheep. The sign points to a Christ who doesn't know he's supposed to begin his ministry in the temple, not a week-long party, or at least that he's supposed to teach, preach and moralize, not create 120 gallons of wine to keep the party going. Extraordinary.

The secularism of our culture is not the denial of God, but an insistence that God stay in the places and times assigned to God.

Secularism is not the denial of religion so much as it is a determined confinement of religion to its assigned place and role in society. And here is God's Christ saying that all of life, not just religion, is the arena of God's activity and love and judgment and grace.

Soren Kierkegaard said somewhere that while Jesus turned water into wine his people seem determined to turn the wine back into water. That is to say to confine the liberating, forgiving, renewing love of God to a Sunday morning religion - which is often grim and without obvious relevance to the rest of life. The sign points to the truth, the word from God, that joy, celebration, life and love, humanity are the order of the day; that God's love penetrates all of life and can transform anything, any situation, into an occasion of gratitude, laughter and celebration.

One of the consistent images of God's kingdom on earth, from beginning to end, from the elders of Israel sitting outside their Bedouin tents eating the meal of the Passover, to the early Christian Church hiding behind locked doors eating a love feast, to the time beyond time when God gathers up all human history and everybody sits down at the banquet table of heaven. Throughout the image is the meal, the feast, the glad celebration, the table

at which food and wine is abundant and at which there is a place for everyone.

Jesus began his ministry at Cana, began to live out the truth about God, about life, not in the temple, because not everybody was welcome there. Lots of ordinary people couldn't get in. The women and the children only got so far. The lame and blind, the unclean and impure, the sinners were outside, so were people of other races. Jesus, God's Christ, started to live out the truth at a wedding, a family celebration which called together and embraced and affirmed each of its members. No one was excluded and when the celebration slowed down, it was he - Jesus the Christ - who provided a way for it to continue.

So no matter who your are, no matter how ordinary you think you are, you are made extraordinary by the hospitality of Jesus. No matter how rich or poor, male or female, young or old, no matter what the color of your skin, no matter whether the culture says you are "OK" or "not OK," clean or unclean, you are an honored guest at this feast.

James Forbes, who preached here last Sunday, told a group of ministers about how it was in his childhood. There were eight children. His busy mother didn't even try to count at meal time. Instead she asked "Who's not here - get him a plateful." No one could begin until there was food on the plate and a place at the table for each of her children.

The sign of Cana is that there is a place at the table of the Lord, a place in God's love and grace for everyone, each of us, ordinary men and women, invited in, transformed by God's love, into something quite extraordinary - a guest at the banquet of heaven.

"Jesus did this," the Bible says, "the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

Amen.